DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 480 975 CE 085 538

TITLE	Getting Ahead: A Survey of Low-Wage Workers on Oppo-tunities for Advancement.
INSTITUTION	Lake Snell Perry & Associates, Inc., Washington, DC.
SPONS AGENCY	Jobs for the Future, Boston, MA.
PUB DATE	2003-09-00
NOTE	12p.; Study commissioned in conjunction with Workforce Innovation Networks as part of a larger project funded by the U.S. Department of Labor.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research (143)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Community Colleges; Education Work Relationship; *Educational Attitudes; *Employee Attitudes; Employment Level; Employment Potential; *Employment Practices; Employment Qualifications; Family Work Relationship; Job Training; *Low Income Groups; Marketing of Education; National Surveys; Occupational Aspiration; Postsecondary Education; *Promotion (Occupational); Telephone Surveys; Work Attitudes; Work Experience; *Working Poor
IDENTIFIERS	Employee Surveys

ABSTRACT

A nationwide sample of low-wage workers was conducted to ascertain their attitudes and experience regarding opportunities for advancement. Professional interviewers conducted telephone interviews with a random sample of 1,002 adults who work outside the home at least 30 hours per week and earn up to 200% of the federal poverty level. The respondents were relatively satisfied with their current job situations, and most considered their jobs secure. Most respondents wanted to upgrade their skills and move up to better jobs. Significant numbers of low-income workers said that balancing work and home responsibilities made focusing on their career difficult. Most of the low-wage workers surveyed believed that getting more training or a degree would enhance their prospects for getting ahead in their careers. Just under half of those surveyed had experience with education or training programs that were intended to upgrade their jobs. Half of those who had taken part in a training or education program have had a job-related positive outcome, such as a new job or a raise. The respondents rated community colleges as their preferred source for education and job training. The survey results suggested a gap in low-wage workers' awareness of the public system and their use of its services. Better marketing and outreach were recommended as ways of reducing the gap. (Contains 10 figures.) (MN)

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Getting Ahead:

A Survey of Low-Wage Workers On Opportunities for Advancement

Conducted by Lake Snell Perry & Associates for Jobs for the Future

September 2003

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JOBS FOR THE FUTURE

CREATING STRATEGIES for Employment and Economic Opportunity

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Getting Ahead:

A Survey of Low-Wage Workers On Opportunities for Advancement

Conducted by
Lake Snell Perry & Associates for Jobs for the Future

IN THE WINTER OF 2003, Jobs for the Future commissioned Lake Snell Perry & Associates to conduct this survey of low-wage workers. This survey was designed to explore the opinions and experiences of low-wage workers regarding career advancement, opportunities for education and job training, and job search resources, with a focus on awareness of, interest in, and usage of public resources. It was conducted as part of a larger project funded by the U.S. Department of Labor focused on employer engagement with and views about the publicly funded workforce system.*

Lake Snell Perry & Associates surveyed 1,002 Americans who work outside the home for at least 30 hours per week and live in households with annual incomes up to 200% of the federal poverty level. The survey was conducted from February 25 to March 18, 2003, by phone using professional interviewers and a random-digit dial sample (RDD).

Here are the main findings:

- Low-wage workers are relatively satisfied with their current job situations, and most feel their jobs are secure. They are less satisfied with their earnings and opportunities for growth.
- Most low-wage workers want to upgrade their skills and move up to better jobs. However, they see a lack of job opportunities where they live and their own lack of skills as significant barriers to advancement.
- Significant numbers of low-income workers say that balancing work and home responsibilities makes it difficult for them to focus on their careers. They say that finding help with child care, transportation, and other personal problems would improve their ability to get ahead at work.

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* Jobs for the Future commissioned *Getting Ahead* in conjunction with Workforce Innovation Networks, a partnership with the Center for Workforce Preparation at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the National Association of Manufacturers' Center for Workforce Success. Launched in 1997, WINs works with local employer organizations across the country that are on the cutting-edge of workforce development, testing the proposition that they can play a unique intermediary role in achieving a dual goal: improving the economic prospects of disadvantaged job-seekers and workers while meeting the needs of their member firms for employees at the entry-level and above. The U.S. Department of Labor funding also supported a Center for Workforce Preparation survey, *Rising to the Challenge*, which examined employers' use of the publicly funded workforce development system.

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- Most low-wage workers feel that getting more training or a degree would enhance their prospects for getting ahead in their careers. They say they face multiple barriers to participating in job training and education programs. In addition to work and family responsibilities, these barriers include the expense of education or training programs and a lack of knowledge regarding how to find out about and enroll in such programs.
- Just under half of those surveyed have experience with education or training programs meant to upgrade their job skills. Most often, these programs are sponsored and paid for by employers and aimed at developing specific skills. Nearly a quarter of low-wage workers have paid for training to get ahead at work themselves.
- Half of those who have taken part in a training or education program have had a job-related positive outcome, such as a new job or a raise. And the survey likely understates the incidence of career-advancement outcomes: those with the most positive outcomes may no longer be part of the survey population due to increased incomes.
- The survey identifies low-wage workers' preferences for different providers of education and training. Community colleges rated highest as sources for education and job training.
- Most low-wage workers who have made use of public resources for job searches and other services have found them useful, but they rate other sources more highly.
- In general, the survey results suggest a gap in low-wage workers' awareness of the public system and their use of its services, a gap that better outreach and marketing might narrow.

Detailed results follow.

JOBS FOR THE FUTURE
CREATING STRATEGIES for Educational and Economic Opportunity

Jobs for the Future seeks to accelerate the educational and economic advancement of youths and adults struggling in today's economy. Jobs for the Future partners with leaders in education, business, government, and communities around the nation in order to: strengthen opportunities for youth to succeed in postsecondary learning and high-skill careers; increase opportunities for low-income individuals to move into family-supporting careers; and meet the growing economic demand for knowledgeable and skilled workers. For more information, see www.jff.org.

Previous Jobs for the Future surveys are available at www.jff.org. *A National Survey of American Attitudes About Low-Wage Workers and Welfare Reform*, conducted in 2000, showed strong support for policies that help people get, keep, and advance in good jobs that pay family-supporting wages. *Public Views on Low Wage Workers in the Current Economy*, conducted in 2001, one month after 9/11, showed strong public support for programs that help low-wage workers and their families who might be hurt by an economic slowdown. *Survey of Workforce Development Professionals on the Role of Employers*, conducted in 2002 by Jobs for the Future and our partners in Workforce Innovation Networks—WINs—looks at the connection between employer engagement and the goal of helping the unemployed and low-income workers find and succeed in family-sustaining careers.

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Interest In and Barriers To Advancement

Low-wage workers are relatively satisfied with their current job situations. They are somewhat less satisfied with their earnings and opportunities for growth.

Low-wage workers are fairly satisfied with their current jobs. (Those working multiple jobs were asked about the job at which they work the most hours; 20 percent worked more than one job.) Nine in ten (88%) say they are satisfied, and almost half (46%) are *very* satisfied with their job overall. *(Figure 1)* Moreover, low-wage workers appear to feel secure in their current positions; over half (57%) are *very* satisfied with their job security.

A third (32%) of those surveyed say they are *very* satisfied with their opportunity to grow in their jobs through education or training through their employer. Likewise, three in ten (30%) are very satisfied with their opportunities for advancement in their current job.

Workers are least satisfied with the money they make. Two in ten (19%) say they are very satisfied.

Getting ahead is a priority for most low-wage workers.

Getting ahead matters to a majority of low-wage workers. As *Figure 2* shows, three-quarters (77%) say getting ahead in their job or career is important to them at this point in their life, including almost six in ten (56%) who say it is very important. For only about two in ten (22%), getting ahead is not a top priority.

When asked what "getting ahead" means, most (96%) say it is about earning more money. However, getting a promotion (76%) and having better work conditions or schedules (75%) are also important aspects of advancement for most workers.

FIGURE 1

How satisfied are you with the following aspects of your job?

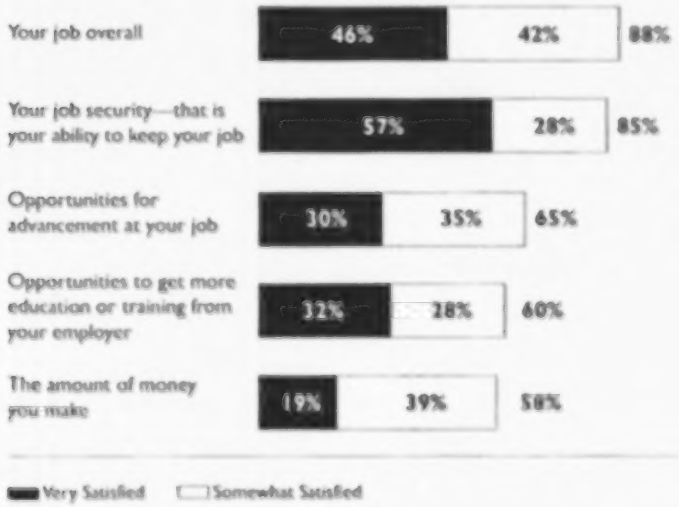
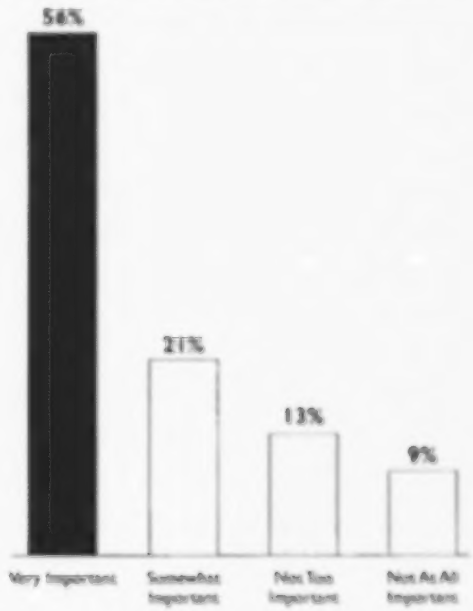


FIGURE 2:

At this point in your life, how important is getting ahead in your job or career?



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A lack of job opportunities where they live and their own lack of skills top workers' lists of barriers to advancement.

Survey participants were asked about a number of potential barriers to career advancement. *(Figure 3)* A majority say a barrier for them personally was a lack of opportunities in their area: two-thirds (67%) say this is a barrier and almost half (46%) say it is a major barrier.

Almost half (46%) say they do not have the right skills to move up, suggesting a need for education and training services. Two in ten (20%) say this is a major barrier.

Four in ten (40%) say responsibilities at home are a barrier to career advancement, and one in seven (14%) label this a major barrier. Minorities of a quarter or less point to other barriers: fear of losing public benefits (25%), workplace discrimination (26%), and criminal records (11%).

It is worth noting that none of the potential barriers we tested are seen as major barriers by a majority of those surveyed. This suggests that factors we did not ask about may be holding them back from advancing.

Most low-wage workers feel that training and education would help them to advance.

Survey respondents were asked what would help them to advance in their careers. Two-thirds (67%) say "getting training in a specific skill" would help, and 45 percent feel it would help a lot. Six in ten (62%) say "getting a degree such as a GED, Associate's, or college degree" would help them to advance, and almost half (46%) say it would help a lot.

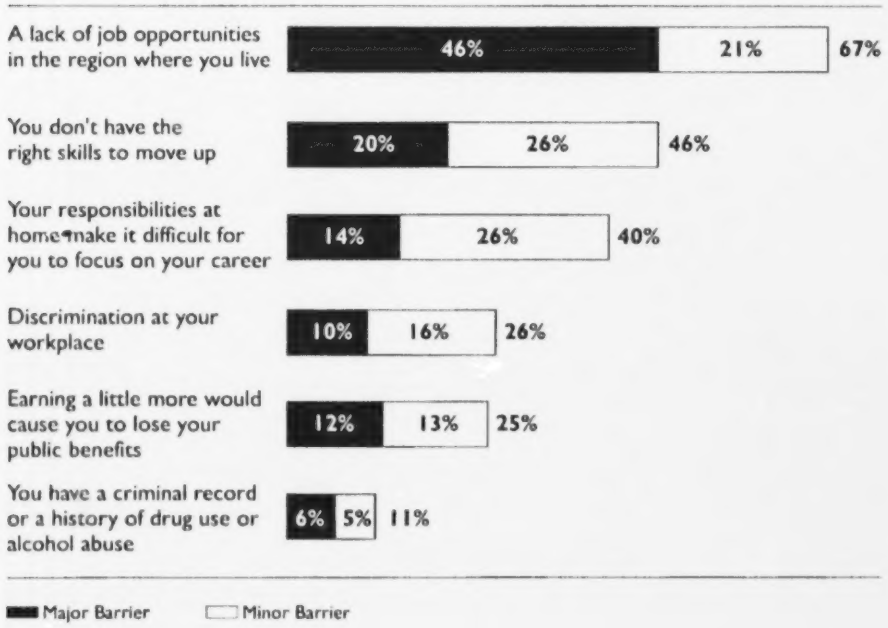
Interest In and Barriers To Training and Education

Low-wage workers are more interested in education and job training programs than other types of job-related assistance for workers and their families.

Low-wage workers were asked about their interest in a number of programs that help

FIGURE 3:

How much of a barrier to getting ahead is this for you?



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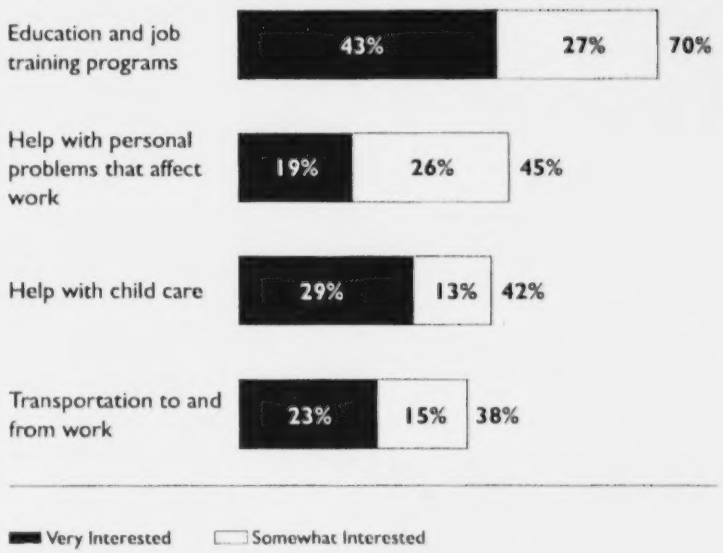
working people get and keep a job. As *Figure 4* shows, respondents express more interest in education and job training programs than in any of the others; in fact, it is the only type of assistance in which over half the low-wage workers surveyed express interest. Seven in ten (70%) say they are interested, and over four in ten (43%) *very* interested. Across all subgroups, education and job training is the kind of assistance in which low-wage workers are most interested.

Fewer low-wage workers, although still substantial minorities, are interested in other services for working families. Over four in ten (45%) are interested in getting help with personal problems that affect work, with two in ten (19%) *very* interested in this. Four in ten (42%) are interested in help with child care, including three in ten (29%) who are very interested. Four in ten (38%) are interested in transportation assistance.

FIGURE 4:
How much would you be interested in:

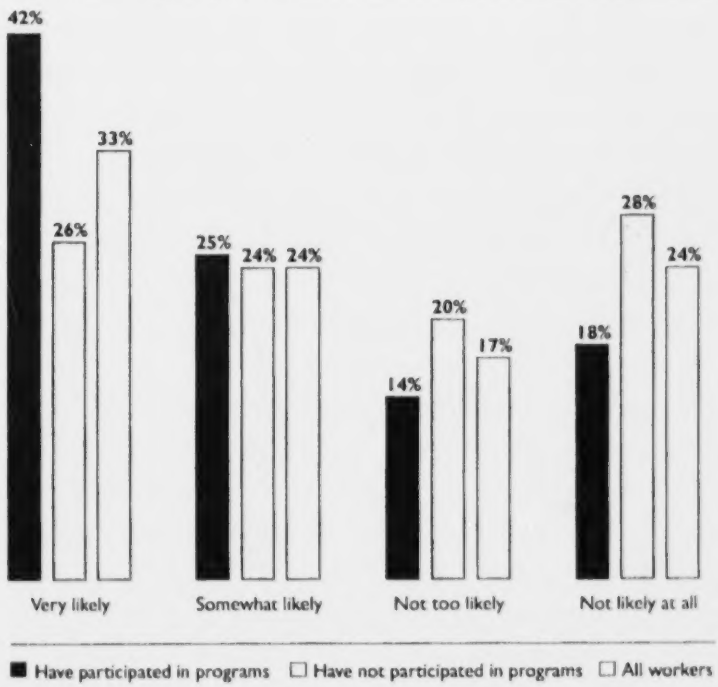


Expenses, scheduling conflicts, and lack of knowledge are the biggest barriers to participating in education and training.

Survey participants were asked how likely they were to take part in a training or education program in the next two years. Given their interest in getting ahead in their careers and the widely held feeling that additional training or education would help them get ahead, one might expect a large number to plan on pursuing training and education over the next few years. In fact, this is not the case. (*Figure 5*) Over half (57%) say they are likely "to take part in (another/an) education or training program within the next two years." A third (33%) of low-wage workers are very likely to do so. The remaining four in ten workers say they are not too likely (17%) or not likely at all (24%) to do so. Among workers who have participated in education or training in the last three years, two out of three (67%) say they are likely to do so again.

A natural question then arises: what are the barriers to participation? As *Figure 6* shows, low-wage workers say expense is the most significant barrier to participating in education

FIGURE 5
How likely are you to take part in education or training within the next two years?



or training programs. Two-thirds (65%) of those surveyed say expense is a barrier. Over a third (36%) say this is a major barrier. This suggests a need for better communication about available resources and options for funding education and training.

Work and family responsibilities are a substantial barrier. Almost two-thirds (64%) consider their work schedules to be a barrier to program participation, and a third (34%) say this is a major barrier. Over six in ten (62%) say that home responsibilities make participating in a program difficult; three in ten (30%) consider this a major barrier.

Over half (55%) say that one barrier they face to participating in job training or education programs is that they "do not know much about these programs or how to get enrolled in them." A quarter (23%) says this is a major barrier. Again, this suggests that better communication about options is a necessary step toward getting people enrolled in programs and onto the path to career growth.

Other barriers are cited by substantial minorities of low-wage workers. Over four in ten believe that the training they want is not available in their area (45%) and that they do not have the basic skills to begin a training program (45%). Over four in ten (44%) believe that training programs will not give them the necessary skills to move ahead.

Workers' Experiences with Programs and Services

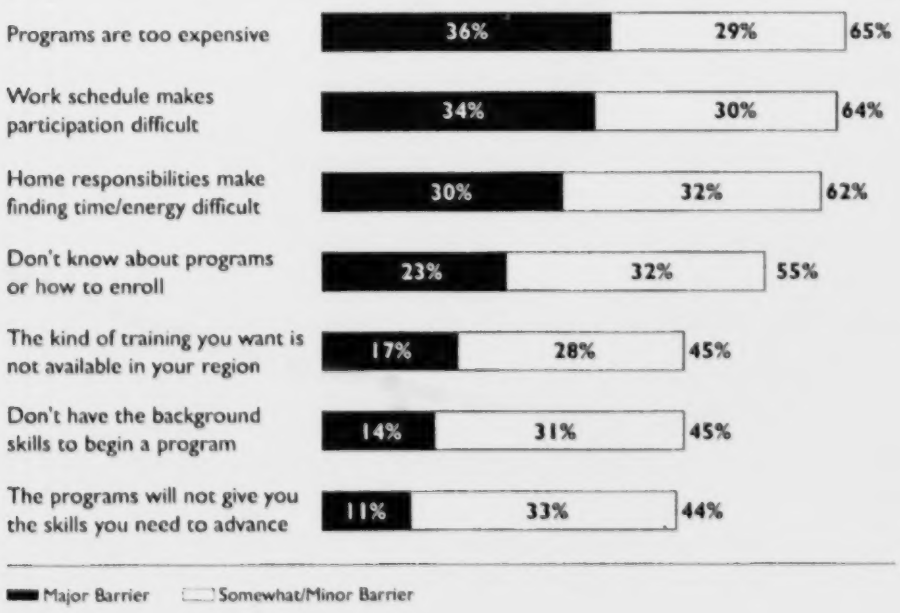
Over four in ten low-wage workers are now, or have in the past three years, participated in job training or education programs to upgrade their work skills. Often, this training was at their workplace or paid for by the employer.

Almost half of those surveyed are currently (14%) or have in the past (31%) participated in education or training to upgrade their skills. *(Figure 7)* Just over half (55%) have never participated in any such program.

Low-wage workers report receiving this training or education from a variety of sources.

FIGURE 6:

How much of a barrier have each of the following been for you to taking part in education or training programs?



The most common source is an employer (33%), followed closely by a community college (30%). Fewer than one in five reports receiving training from a "local training agency or organization" (16%) or "a government agency" (15%).

Low-wage workers also report that their training or education was paid for in a variety of ways. A four in ten plurality (38%) reports that their employer paid. Just over a quarter (27%) report that theirs was paid for by "a government grant or public assistance program of some kind." A quarter (24%) report that they paid for the training themselves. Over one in ten (14%) says their training or education was free.

When asked what they learned in this training or education program, most of those surveyed say they received "training in a specific skill or for a specific kind of job" (74%). Just under a quarter (23%) report they got "a degree such as a GED or Associate's degree." A few others got basic education (9%) or some other kind of training (9%).

Who sponsors and pays for the training tends to differ by the type of training. Skill or job-specific training is most often conducted and paid for by employers. Those workers who got a degree are more likely to have had their studies paid for by a government program and to have gotten this training at a community college.

Many low-wage workers appear to have benefited from their training or education programs.

Half (49%) of those who have participated in a training or education program of some sort report a concrete, work-related positive outcome, such as a new job or a raise. *(Figure 8)* Another sign of the value of this training is that those who are now or have in the recent past participated in an education or training program are more likely than those who have not to say they are likely to take part in another education or training program within the next two years. As noted above, among workers who have participated in education

FIGURE 7:

Are you now, or have you ever, participated in an education or training program to upgrade your job skills?

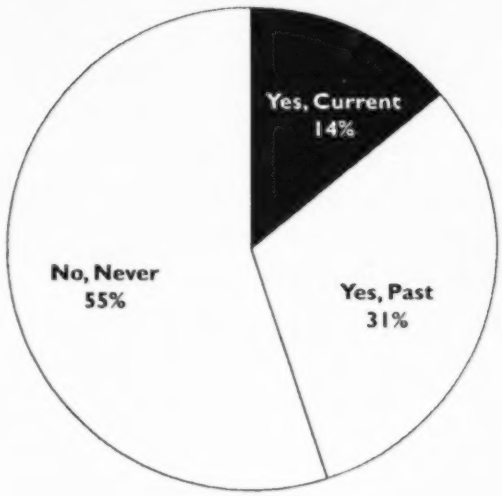
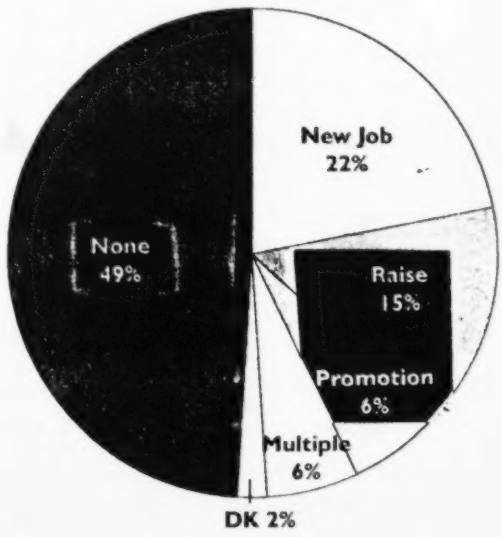


FIGURE 8:

Did you get a raise, a promotion, or a new job as a result of this training program, or not?



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or training in the last three years, two out of three (67%) say they are likely to do so again. Four in ten (42%) of those who have recently participated in training or education say they are *very* likely to do so again, compared to only one-quarter (26%) of those who have not had recent experiences with education or training.

It is important and instructive to look at the type of training workers receive, where and how they receive this training, and the positive outcomes. However, it is also important to recognize that these findings cannot tell the full story about low-wage workers' experiences with education and training. Work-related positive outcomes are likely underrepresented here. Some low-wage workers who have participated in a training or education program—indeed, the most successful program participants—may no longer be below 200% of the federal poverty line and consequently were not interviewed for this survey.

Barriers to Low-Wage Workers' Use of Public Resources

Workers are interested in getting ahead, and they believe that training and education is an important step toward that goal. The next question is what role public resources play in helping workers get the training and education to reach their career goals.

The survey results suggest that many low-wage workers are not taking advantage of public resources, such as career centers and training subsidies. The research also suggests that three barriers are at play: lack of awareness of public resources, lack of confidence in public resources, and, to a lesser extent, lack of access to public resources. We now review the findings that support this hypothesis, some of which have been touched on earlier in this report.

A minority of low-wage workers have attended government training programs or used government funding to get training.

As explained above, of the low-wage workers who have participated in job training and education programs, fewer than three in ten (27%) report that the program was paid for by "a government grant or public assistance program of some kind." This is nearly as many as those who paid for training themselves (24%). Likewise, only 15 percent of those who have participated in a training or education program report that the training was conducted by "a government agency," and only 16% report that it was conducted by a "local training agency or organization." These low usage levels suggest a gap in either awareness or access.

A lack of awareness of and confidence in public resources are barriers to program participation.

Figure 6 explored barriers to program participation. Several of these suggest awareness gaps on the part of low-wage workers about public resources. Over half (55%) say that one barrier they face to participating in job training or education programs is that they "do not know much about these programs or how to get enrolled in them," and a quarter (23%) say this is a major barrier.

The biggest barrier appears to be the perception that training and education programs are too expensive. If cost is a serious barrier, low usage may primarily be an awareness issue: workers need to be informed about how they can get free or low-cost training or get help paying for more expensive programs.

Confidence in the value of available services may also be an important barrier: over four in ten (44%) low-wage workers believe that training programs—be they government or not—will not give them the skills they need to advance.

Non-governmental agencies are preferred as sources for education and training and other programs that help working people and families.

These results suggest another significant barrier to the use of public sources of education and training services: a preference for non-governmental sources. As *Figure 4* shows, 70 percent of low-wage workers express interest in education and training programs. When those who were interested were asked about their preferred source for education and job training, government agencies came out near the bottom of the list of offered choices. *(Figure 9)* Community colleges are rated highest. Only 4 percent view churches or religious groups as the best provider for education and training.

As noted earlier, some low-wage workers are also interested in help with child care, transportation to and from work, and personal problems that affect work. When asked if they have ever tried to get help with any of these services, over four in ten of those who had not tried to get help (43%) say they do not know that such help is available.

Most low-wage workers turn to personal contacts and classified ads in job searches; fewer use government or local agencies.

Low-wage workers were asked about their experiences with a list of job search resources. As *Figure 10* shows, two-thirds of participants have used friends and family (66%) in job searches, and almost as many have used the want ads (64%). Four in ten (38%) have used a temp agency. Only one in five has used a "government employment office like a 'one stop'" (21%) or a local training agency or organization (21%).

Note that the survey did not ask people if they had heard of "one-stops" or "local training agencies," only if they have used them. Many people might not know about these resources, or, if they do know of them, they may not know about the range of available services. Moreover, users of these services might not differentiate between "government

FIGURE 9:

Which of the following sources do you think would be the best for education and job training?

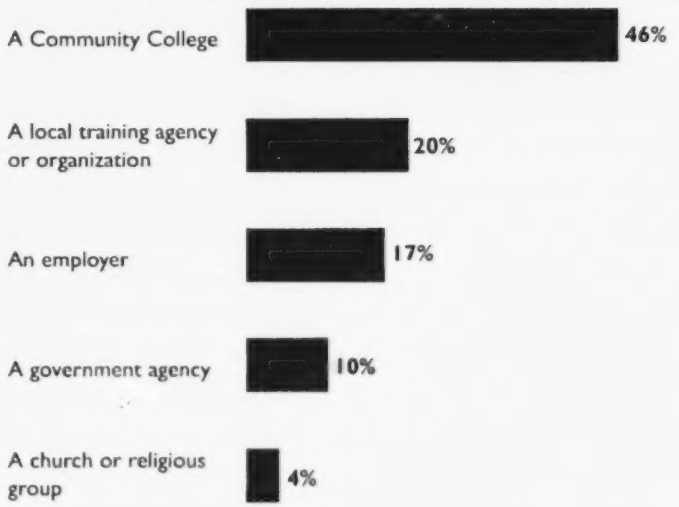
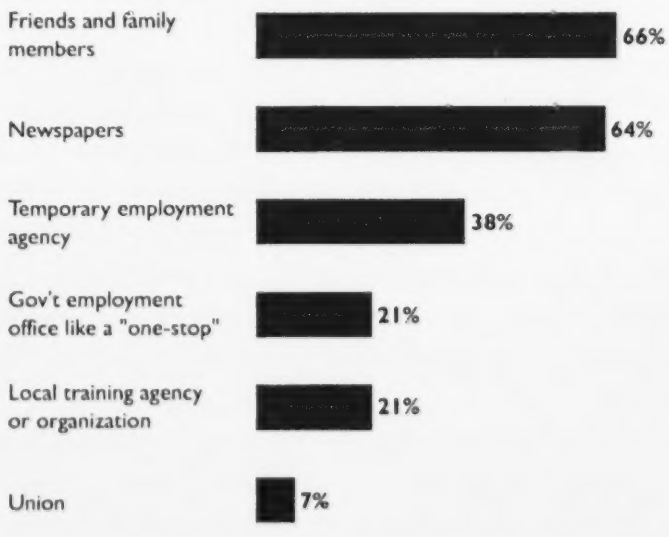


FIGURE 10:

Have you ever used this source in looking for a job?



employment offices like 'one-stops'" and "local training agencies or organizations."

Most low-wage workers who have used public resources have found them useful, but they rate other sources for job searches, training, and education more highly.

Those with experience with these various sources were asked about their usefulness. The most useful resource for job search appears to be friends and family. Almost all (94%) say they have found this source useful. People have had slightly less overwhelming, yet still positive, results from newspaper ads (80%), temporary employment agencies (71%), and unions (68%). Three-quarters (75%) of those who have used a local training agency or organization found it useful. While government employment offices rate lowest among the sources rated, their rating is still relatively positive. Among those who have used this source, two-thirds (66%) say it was useful.

Methodology

Lake Snell Perry & Associates designed and administered this survey, which was conducted by phone using professional interviewers. The survey reached 1,002 low-wage workers nationwide. The survey was conducted between February 25 and March 18, 2003. For this survey, low-wage workers were defined as individuals from households with annual incomes up to 200% of the federal poverty limit and working outside the home for at least 30 hours per week. Individuals who are primarily self-employed were excluded.

Telephone numbers for the survey were drawn from a random digit dial sample (RDD), thereby allowing access to all listed and unlisted phones. The sample was distributed geographically based on the expected distribution of lower-income households. These data were not weighted because there are no established parameters to do that for this group, particularly given how low-wage workers were defined for this survey. However, demographic data were checked to ensure comparability with studies and census data of similar populations.

The poll has a margin of error of +/- 3.1 percentage points and includes statistically significant oversamples of African-Americans and Hispanics. Among the respondents, 16 percent had not completed high school, 43 percent had completed high school, 27 percent had some education after high school but without completing a college degree, and 13 percent had completed a college degree.

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